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# The Irony of E.A. Poe's *Lunatick Asylum*

*Daniela Fargione*

## Abstract

When 'The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether' was published in 1845 (the same year in which The Lunatics Act was implemented in England, dramatically changing the concept of the insane from prisoner to patient), Poe's readers were already familiar with a whole gallery of 'madmen.' Up to that point, though, their mental disorders had been described as inherited faults, primarily qualified as 'hypertrophy of the senses' and acted out within domestic spaces. 'The System,' by contrast, is the first and only short story by Poe that deals with mental illness as a recognized pathology and with a lunatic asylum, the ideal *locus* for its treatment and, in particular, for Philippe Pinel's 'moral treatment' here called 'the system of soothing.' Because of its humorous tone, most of Poe's critics classified this tale as a satire. What I argue is that Poe's irony is directed to America at large through the narrator. Poe's intention is to cast doubts on the supposed philanthropic aims of these institutions' founders, while operating in the historical context of social policy development. Lastly, I address a larger subject: how Poe's fiction manifests scientific knowledge and ideas on madness as legitimized by contemporary psychiatry.

**Key Words:** Poe, irony, mental illness, lunatic asylums, moral treatment, Philippe Pinel, law and enforcement.

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## 1. Editorial and Critical Vicissitudes

When in November 1845 'The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether' was finally published after being 'in the hands of different editors' for more than a year, the short story did not attract much critical attention, neither did it engender great curiosity among the reading public.<sup>1</sup> One of the major causes of this lukewarm response was determined by the unambiguous treatment of the tale's disturbing theme: madness. Although Poe's readers were already familiar with a whole gallery of 'madmen,' their mental disorders had been described as heritable faults, primarily qualified as 'hypertrophy of the senses' and acted out within domestic spaces. On the contrary, 'The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether,' by contrast, is the first and only short story by Poe that deals with mental illness as a recognized pathology and with a lunatic asylum, the ideal *locus* for its treatment and, in particular, for Philippe Pinel's 'moral treatment' here called 'the system of soothing.' Moreover, if elsewhere in his work, mental disorders are mostly explored in highly dramatic tones, with this tale the writer gives proof of his cogent satirical skills, thus prompting many critics to classify it as a satire.

In much of Poe's fiction of the 1830's and 1840's, irony is often used as a vehicle for pungent social criticism, but it took a long time for Poe's satirical production to be redeemed from the shared opinion of stylistic failure.<sup>2</sup> In this tale, in particular, American scholars have limited their studies to the unmasking of the real identity of the main character, thus neglecting the narrator's crucial role in the structure of the whole story.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Poe: Creative Genius or Psychotic?

On October 9, 1849, the (in)famous *Ludwig Article*, written by Poe's literary executor and enemy, the Reverend Rufus W. Griswold, announced Poe's death:

EDGAR ALLAN POE is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it. ... He was at times a dreamer - dwelling in ideal realms - in heaven or hell, peopled with creations and the accidents of his brain. He walked the streets, in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses, or with eyes upturned in passionate prayers (never for himself, for he felt, or professed to feel, that he was already damned).<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to the way he lived, the histrionic Poe made a silent exit from the American literary stage. Despite Griswold's calumnious treatment of Poe's biographical facts, the writer's death marked the starting point of an endless process of analysis meant to shed light on his personality. The first theories on Poe's vagaries, still far from the psychoanalytical investigations of the twentieth century, drew heavily on the medical knowledge of the time. Griswold himself, for instance, in his notorious *Memoir*, offered a portrait of a partially insane man, pathologically inclined to alcohol consumption and laudanum addiction. Other hypotheses came from overseas. In 1860, Dr. H. Maudsley, psychologist and superintendent of the Manchester Royal Lunatic Hospital, wrote an essay on E.A. Poe, ushering in a series of speculations supported by 'scientific' claims.<sup>5</sup> Maudsley's interpretations of Poe's mental derangement undoubtedly reflect well-established notions on heredity. Therefore, while on the one side Poe's work emerges as the product of a mentally ill person, on the other his madness is justified as being an inevitable congenital condition.<sup>6</sup> Poe's first biographies, starting from the celebrated one by J.W. Krutch, tended to reconcile life and art, frequently jeopardising critical objectivity. The psychological morbidity of the writer's characters thus triggered a juxtaposition of reality and fiction.<sup>7</sup> During his lifetime Poe undeniably took advantage of this very ambiguity in order to shape his own public figure, and not without personal amusement.

According to G.R. Thompson, irony allowed E.A. Poe to both contemplate and protect himself from his multiple obsessions, and 'The System of Dr. Tarr and

Prof. Fether' confronts some of them.<sup>8</sup> To begin with: his writing fixation. The year 1844, in fact, was the *Annus Mirabilis* for his production.<sup>9</sup> Poe seemed to be prey to a fit of industriousness, which eventually resulted in a vast range of compositions and publications, including thirteen short stories, various articles, reviews, sketches, and two instalments of 'Marginalia.' A letter written to his friend James Russell Lowell that July, suggests that Poe's frenzy was a sort of monomania, '... I scribble all day, and read all night, so long as the *disease* endures.'<sup>10</sup> In this case, his writing pre/occupation reveals to be a welcome and productive disordered status, but other letters by Poe inform us of a more serious concern that the writer seems to have acknowledged since 1842, while in November 1845, the same month he published 'The System,' he confessed to editor Evert A. Duyckinck that he believed he had 'been mad.'<sup>11</sup>

Poe's concern over the real possibility of being pathologically ill recurs quite frequently in his correspondence; indeed, he was never reticent about his lifelong eccentricities and drunken debauchery, which people often regarded as clear symptoms of his mental illness. At different times, Poe felt the need to justify his antics through the contingencies to which his life was subject. A good example comes from the publication on July 10, 1846 of Poe's reply to his literary enemy Thomas Dunn English, who had accused him of forgery. Obviously, the episode contributed to fuel the animosity of their adversarial relationship, which eventually culminated in Poe's successful libel lawsuit. Poe wrote to defend himself from his enemy's accusations,

... there was an epoch at which it might not have been wrong in me to hint ... that the irregularities so profoundly lamented were the *effect* of a terrible evil rather than its cause.<sup>12</sup>

The following year, Poe included his reply to English in a letter to George Eveleth, a medical student, who had enquired about those 'irregularities so profoundly lamented.' Poe wrote him back on January 4, 1848,

I am constitutionally sensitive - nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank, God only knows how often or how much. As a matter of course, my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity. I had indeed, nearly abandoned all hope of a permanent cure when I found one in the *death* of my wife.<sup>13</sup>

Public speculation about the writer's condition of mental illness widely circulated at the time and Poe himself, with his penchant for histrionics and self-dramatization, contributed to the dissemination of charges of drug addiction, chronic

alcoholism and general mental impairment. Eventually, the eternal riddle on whether Poe was more genius or madman is of slight importance, but at the same time Poe's private concerns with this issue require some attention.<sup>14</sup> In many different ways, in fact, they conjure up a more general debate that intrigued early American republic: what was the proper response to mental illness?

### 3. Madness, Blackness and American Hypocrisy

As Benjamin Reiss argues in a recent study, these central topics of public discourse were inextricably intertwined with issues of 'democracy, freedom, and modernity,' and involved the whole nation.<sup>15</sup> Possibly, this explains why most American criticism on Poe's 'The System' has recently concentrated on the interconnections between psychiatry and race.<sup>16</sup> Although the writer fundamentally eschews in his work explicit commentary on contemporary ideological issues - such as racial differences and reformist causes, law enforcement and bodily restraints - his obstinate ambiguity does not prevent his critics from tracing a parallel between mental illness and slavery. Gerald J. Kennedy, for instance, explains that Poe's decision to set the story in the 'extreme southern provinces of France' might be seen as a strategy to allude to the subtext of the antislavery debate, allowing him to trace a pivotal analogy between madness and blackness.<sup>17</sup> Besides, Kennedy argues that the tales written between 1831 and 1842 may be considered 'Eurocentric,' or 'doubly foreign' (i.e., uncanny *and* un-American). In order to reinforce his view, he states that for much of Poe's activity he 'avoided explicitly national subjects; of his 42 tales (out of roughly 70), only a handful explicitly refer to American problems, places, or themes - and then often ironically.'<sup>18</sup> Yet, while defining the short story as a 'multilayered satire,' the critic concludes by wondering: 'Is the tale ... a simple warning about the dangers of abolitionist reform or a more complicated critique of American political hypocrisy?'<sup>19</sup> If it is true that the tale is not more about mental illness than about racial issues, Reiss's commentary should be taken in serious consideration, especially when he states that readings of the story as 'racial allegory have to some degree supplanted critical interest in Poe's treatment of insanity *as* insanity and asylums *as* asylums (instead of as metaphorical plantations).'<sup>20</sup> As we will see, the American political hypocrisy extended to also include the 'management' of madness.

### 4. America's Progress and Poe's Dissent

Although it is incontestable that places and dates in most of Poe's tales lack specificity, their issues and themes are always genuinely American. Both his fictional and his critical oeuvre, in fact, may be considered as an attack on the modernity of a new American faith that went under the name of 'democratic progress' and whose major results were technological and scientific achievements. Not only does the tale reflect the strong scientific interest of Poe's contemporaries,

but also seems to echo the most recent discoveries in medicine, phrenology and eugenics. Within the texture of the prose, the reader can often catch allusions to Philippe Pinel and Benjamin Rush, to the concept of heredity, and to the general tendency to hospitalize the insane (while still acknowledging his juridical status within society).

Moreover, both the history of the *Lunatick Asylum* and America's attitude toward the 'Other' are analyzed here with unconventional lucidity. As a matter of fact, despite his iconoclastic attitude toward his own social milieu, Poe could not totally eschew the influence of such a dynamic and tormented time. On the contrary, he seemed to be able to grasp its limits, and while indicting its false morality, he also denounced its political and governmental inadequacies. Hence, it is my contention that one of Poe's attempts in this humorous tale is to cast doubts on the supposed philanthropic aims of these institutions' founders, who are depicted while operating in the historical context of social policy development. America, Poe seems to suggest, fails to perceive what a century later the French philosopher Michel Foucault would recognize as a massive confinement of *inconvenient people*.<sup>21</sup>

Within a national system of collective consensus, Poe emerged as a dissenter. From this perspective, Poe's works may be seen as instruments used to exorcise both personal and collective fears and obsessions. In plots where murderers, mentally unstable people and boneheads are the main characters, it is quite reassuring to believe that terror pertains to other people only. In a way, this literary strategy was Poe's personal reaction to the 'psychic effacement' of the brutality and violence underpinning the social and political contradictions of the new republic, something that many writers espoused to endorse their 'national fabulation'.<sup>22</sup>

Through a mechanism of displacement, then, Poe's irony is invested with the function of comic relief, and it allows the reader to enjoy what Edmund Burke would have called 'delight'.<sup>23</sup> Terror, which raises to the level of *passion par excellence*, provokes a negative pleasure, and even though it evokes a threat to the self-preservation of the individual, this threat is distant enough to be kept at bay and beyond the threshold of real danger. As a result, irony functions as a sort of defensive strategy for the benefit of the readers, who can use a liberating laugh to contrast their 'obsessions' for any form of anguish, terror, and dismay. On this view, irony alleviates the readers' 'terror of the soul' and their consequent sense of alienation.<sup>24</sup>

Yet Poe could not dismiss one crucial truth: 'To be appreciated you must be read'.<sup>25</sup> In 1841, in one of his reviews of Charles Dickens's works, Poe remarked that, 'the horrid laws of political economy cannot be evaded even by the inspired,' thus indicating his complex and ambivalent relation with the cultural and publishing marketplace of his time.<sup>26</sup> If, on the one hand, his penchant for dissent inspired some of the most caustic critical reviews, on the other hand he felt compelled to meet the fictional expectations of his highly diverse audience. To the awareness that the

reading process and the amount of time that people spent in reading had profoundly changed in America, Poe added the intuition that information had an intrinsic economic value and literature was a marketable commodity. This led him perceptively to detect the criteria that were behind many choices of profit-oriented publishers: saleability was preferred to literary merit, generalization to novelty and originality, provincialism to cosmopolitanism.

Poe's modernity becomes evident through his ingenious escape from this predicament: his readers could be entertained and find enjoyment in his short stories, provided that the writer played a game of pretence in showing a kind of terror, which, although totally American, seemed to belong to somewhere else. Finally, Poe was also aware that the only way to elude his personal 'prison-house' was to surrender to compromises. The ironic treatment of reality, a limited use of temporal markers, and topographic displacements or erasures seemed to be effective concessions. It is not surprising, then, that 'The System' is set in southern France 'during the autumn of 18...' and that it deals with a private madhouse.<sup>27</sup>

### 5. The Irony of an Absent-Minded Narrator

In 'The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether,' the ironic treatment that pervades the story acquires a very provocative function and the effect of derision that involves both the characters and the circumstances eventually results in drama. The writer's objective cannot be limited to a simple rebuke aimed at the fashions and customs of his time; neither is it a bashing of the 'imbecility' of some public figure that he deemed somewhat hostile to his literary ambitions. What is really unmasked in this tale is the deluded nature of humankind, where the vision of human beings seems to be even darker in its comic version.

Differently from Swift or Dryden, whose use of satire had a corrective purpose, Poe's irony does not contemplate any possibility of reformation; rather, it seems to offer very marginal hope for a hypothetical resolution to the vices and follies of humankind. In many instances Poe distinctly expresses his scepticism towards the progressive credo of his age. In 1844, Poe wrote that he had 'no faith in human perfectibility.'<sup>28</sup> Therefore, if Poe's literary construction builds upon these theoretical foundations, we may suppose that his tales reproduce social microcosms, which, despite their humorous tone, show a very serious critical intent.

In 'The System' irony mainly invests the figure of the narrator - 'a very stupid-looking young gentleman'<sup>29</sup> - who plays the role of the 'absent-minded,' while embodying that *credulity* that Poe constantly indicates as the primary cause of the blindness and narcissism of the Jacksonian era:

The world is infested, just now, by a new sect of philosophers, who have not yet suspected themselves of forming a sect, and who,

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consequently, have adopted no name. They are the *Believers in every thing Odd*. ... The only common bond among the sect, is Credulity: - let us call it Insanity at once, and be done with it. Ask anyone of them *why* he believes this or that, and, if he be conscientious, (ignorant people usually are,) he will make you very much such reply as Talleyrand made when asked why he believed in the Bible. 'I believe in it first,' said he, 'because I am Bishop of Autun; and, secondly, *because I know nothing about it at all*.' What these philosophers call 'argument', is a way they have '*de nier ce qui est et d'expliquer ce qui n'est pas*.'<sup>30</sup>

Similarly to the Bishop of Autun, the narrator is both ignorant and naive: his ideas about madness are limited to vague notions that he has acquired in Paris from some 'medical friends,' or from occasional readings ('What I have heard has been at third or fourth hand').<sup>31</sup> Driven by curiosity, he and his travelling acquaintance *deviate* from the main road and ride across a 'dark and gloomy wood' to go visit the lunatic asylum that had become famous for its 'system of soothing.' This is a new method for treating the insane, according to which the patient is free to roam around the house and, although secretly watched, he is seldom confined and rarely punished. The narrator's 'credulity' is expressed in this very first episode; he does not understand, in fact, that his travelling companion is a former inmate in disguise. Yet, if he had only paid more attention to the motivations provided not to dabble in the affairs of the Maison de Santé ('a very usual horror at the sight of a lunatic,' his 'acquaintance of Maillard,' the superintendent, and 'his feelings on the subject of lunacy'), he would possibly have grasped the true reasons of his refusal.<sup>32</sup>

The rational and cautionary attitude that the narrator adopts at the beginning of the story gradually fades away, as he is literally trapped in a vortex of increasingly bizarre situations. His initial candour gradually turns into clumsiness, and his bewilderment is intensified by a sensorial limit, which inevitably produces defective perceptions. His vigilance soon becomes distraction, and '*le distrait*' is in fact the name that Henry Bergson gives to this type of comic character, whose main feature is the unconsciousness of his own condition.<sup>33</sup> Bergson's portrait of the naïf type perfectly coincides with Poe's character. His inability to perceive the role he has been assigned in this farce - namely to be the object of derision of the actual inmates - is a key feature for the writer's game of deceptions. For instance, when Monsieur Maillard, the director of the lunatic asylum, tells him about the revolution that had taken place before his arrival, with an inversion of roles between doctors and patients, the anonymous narrator continues to show all his vacuity. He replies imagining that a 'counter revolution was soon effected' and that 'visitors coming to see the establishment ... would have given the alarm.' On the contrary, the director explains:



There you are out. The head rebel was too cunning for that. He admitted no visitors at all - with the exception one day of a very stupid-looking young gentleman of whom he had no reason to be afraid. He let him to see the place - just by way of variety - *to have a little fun with him. As soon as he had gammoned him sufficiently, he let him out, and sent him about his business.*<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that the narrator's stupidity is in contrast to the director's shrewdness. On different occasions Maillard hints at the urgency to be alert, by stating that 'a madman is not necessarily a fool.'<sup>35</sup> Moreover, when the superintendent gives the motivations that have prompted him to substitute the old therapy of the soothing system with the new system of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether, he explains that its effectiveness was limited in time, since a lunatic's 'dexterity' in counterfeiting sanity is a real challenge. 'When a madman appears *thoroughly* sane, indeed,' Maillard concludes, 'it is high time to put him in a straight jacket.'<sup>36</sup> It is worthless to state that Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether are Monsieur Maillard's fabrication, although at the end of the story the bemused narrator will still be looking for their publications. Obviously, in vain.

## 6. Metamorphoses and Games of Role-play

As we have seen, on more than one occasion the Superintendent seems concerned to dispel any suspicion regarding the mental stability of the people who live and work in the lunatic asylum. The 'air of oddity' the narrator breathes once he steps into the *Maison de Santé*, its bizarre atmosphere, the evident strangeness he perceives in the decoration of the house or in the clothing of the assumed assistants, find a rational explanation in the eccentric character of southern people. It is in this context that both the reader and the narrator of the tale ideally share the same condition: whoever believes in the truthfulness of the story and trusts the protagonist's point of view is eventually infected by the same myopic disease. In this sense, the irony of a distracted narrator is tantamount to the irony of a distracted reader, therefore suggesting a new role that Poe's readership is invested with. Only if endowed with a new sensitivity and by keeping 'a constantly awaken attention,' can they eschew the many inevitable traps - semantic, linguistic, structural - that the author lays in his prose.<sup>37</sup> With Poe, literature becomes trickery, and Mr. Maillard's warnings should not be overlooked:

... time will arrive when you will learn to judge for yourself of what is going on in the world, without trusting to the gossip of others. *Believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see.*<sup>38</sup>

The climax of the story is a case in point, since it shows a gradual process of dehumanization of the characters, which takes place through the implementation of farcical devices, such as the caricature, the masquerade, and the metamorphosis. Similarly to what happens in Poe's *Tales of Ratiocination*, also in his satirical works his attention concentrates on physicality: if Dupin investigates mutilated, cut off, disfigured bodies, in 'The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether' the human bodies are distorted and deformed; in both cases, Poe's narration deals with a loss, since the reader witnesses a total removal of the patients' human features.

At dinner the supposed assistants remember very odd cases of former patients at the Maison de Santé, and good-humoured anecdotes are told in detail. Some keepers even impersonate the inmates, performing and mimicking either the object (a tea-pot, a bottle of champagne, a pinch of snuff, a top), or the animal (a donkey, a frog, a chicken) they fancied themselves to be. Doing so, they gradually lose their personal control of verbal articulation and finally adopt the animals' onomatopoeic language.

Poe's game of metamorphosis is very similar to what takes place in *Wildest Dreams*, Alan Ayckbourn's well known play that Iwona Bojarska explores at length in this volume. According to the author, Ayckbourn's characters are engaged in a game of role-play, whose main function is to identify and confront their inadequacies through the undertaking of new identities.<sup>39</sup> In Poe's short story, the same game operates on two different levels. Firstly, it favours the gradual revelation of the characters' mental illness, and secondly it contributes to intensify the satirical tone of the story, which becomes a parody of American society. To the progressive dismantling of typically human traits, and to the consequent regression to the animal condition corresponds the annihilation of reason. While losing their faculties, psychotics also obliterate their cerebral powers within an aggregative process that seems to be responsible for a transition from 'ordered people' to 'chaotic mob,' where the terminological distinction indicates a systematic gap. In his scepticism towards the new tendencies of his time, Poe concentrated his attention on the individual: 'I cannot agree to lose sight of man the individual, in man the mass,' he wrote to Lowell in 1844.<sup>40</sup> However, despite this indication, the only values he seemed to propose as an alternative to the prevailing philosophy of his time - Bentham's utilitarianism, mainly - were those embodied by the southern aristocracy he belonged to, notably a sentiment of uniqueness that distinguished him from the *canaille*.<sup>41</sup> The reference, for instance, to the 'philosophy of money' rather than to a 'philosophy of good taste' is quite evident in the text.<sup>42</sup> Poe, in fact, feared that the process of democratic levelling could introduce a new kind of aristocracy based on the accumulation of wealth rather than on heredity, and that the code of 'good manners' could be replaced by a code of mere opulence and ostentation.

The final scene, which proposes a counter-revolution with a final inversion of roles and values, re-establishes the domain of reason over folly and literally

explodes through the allegory of 'man as beast.' Among blasted shouts and rampant horror, the real keepers break into the room through the windows. Their fury and their bodies, tarred and feathered, make them similar to 'a perfect army of ... Chimpanzees, Ourang-Outangs, or big black baboons of the Cape of Good Hope.'<sup>43</sup> Believing that order could be restored by grotesque and aggressive 'beasts' is nothing but absurd: reason is as mad as folly.

Moreover, the end of the play and the subsequent understanding of the truth with a re-establishment of the original roles take place against a background of frenzied music. The inmates start singing at the top of their voices the patriotic melody 'Yankee Doodle,' a specific choice that confirms Poe's faithfulness to a certain writing technique, whose major aim is its final effect. 'Yankee Doodle,' in fact, is not a mere pretext to fuel the asylum's carnival, since the song contains strong historical and political implications, while its burlesque tone reinforces the satiric nature of the whole tale.<sup>44</sup> We are informed, for instance, that the word 'Yankee' refers to a New Englander, and that 'Doodle' is a synonym for 'simpleton, noodle, silly, foolish fellow, but generally of the rural type,' a description that perfectly fits Poe's narrator.<sup>45</sup> Besides, traditions place the song's origins in the 1750s during the French and Indian War, at a time when lyrics were composed by British military officers to mock American soldiers and their uniforms. Eventually, 'Yankee Doodle' was adopted by Americans as a national anthem to finally become something of a patriotic cliché.

Several variations of the text appeared in the second edition of the *Annals of Philadelphia*, published by John W. Watson in 1844. Notably: 'Yankee Doodle came to town / Riding on a pony; / He stuck a feather in his hat / And called it Macaroni,' where 'Macaroni' refers to a fashionable fellow whose language and attire are quite affected. Poe must have known this parodied version, which supports his perception of American people's lack of sophistication, together with his strong rebuke to the national value of 'appearance.' The writer seems to insinuate that a feather stuck in a hat is not a definition of elegance; or, alternatively, that governmental bills cannot be judged as valuable by the elegance of their wordings, or their apparent good intentions; and also that people cannot be labelled, confined, and stigmatized as mentally incapable on the basis of their 'external marks.'<sup>46</sup> As we can see, the themes that the tale engages and the debates that it engenders are broad.

Another version of the song, instead, alludes to the common punishment to tar and feather the Tory prisoners of the American Revolution: 'Yankee Doodle came to town / For to buy a firelock: / We will tarr and fether him, / And so we will John Hancock.'<sup>47</sup> The contextualization of the inmates' uprising within the frame of the American Revolution points to another layer of symbolism and alludes to slave revolts. In his study, Benjamin Reiss affirms that Poe implicitly assimilates the claim of early psychiatry, according to which the asylum was 'a key legacy of the revolution and a hallmark of liberal society,' but we may legitimately conclude that

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slavery, institutionalization, and democracy in a post-revolutionary society are indeed incompatible.<sup>48</sup>

The fear of slave revolts lurks in a number of Poe's tales and reflects the anxieties of a whole country in relation to both racial and mental deviance. Another essay included in this section of the book demonstrates how blackness, mental illness and bondage were deeply intertwined and subordinate to the urgent need of keeping non-white populations under control. In fact, Natacha Filippi's study of South African Apartheid informs us that the legitimization of both black criminalization and the segregationist system implemented in the country found due legitimization from South African psychiatry, which proved how 'the Black was constructed as 'the primitive, the unrestrainedly physical, the childish, the hypersexual and potentially violent,' and therefore as the one more prone to being punished.'<sup>49</sup> At the same time, American phrenology maintained the same arguments by often comparing the Black with the Insane on the basis of their similar skull conformation. The general notion of insanity as a regression to a barbaric hereditary state was to be challenged by the supporters of the 'moral therapy' as we shall see in the next paragraph.

#### **7. Benjamin Rush, Philip Pinel and the Moral Treatment**

At the time of E.A. Poe's major compositions, a vast variety of opinions with regard to the nature of the human mind, the dualistic mind/body split, exceptional mental states and diseases were being hotly debated, thus proving how mental disorders had been accepted within the medical purview. In the nineteenth century, the dominant symbol of progressing America was the machine; similarly, the symbol of its evolving population found adequate representation in the organicist equation of the human being as biological machine. But what happened when the entire organic system misfired and could not cope with different external stimuli anymore?

One answer came from Benjamin Rush, one of the most influential figures in bringing mental health under the domain of medicine, as he strongly advocated the notion that mental illness had one or more physical causes and consequently required medical treatment rather than imprisonment. Determined to demonstrate how the aetiology of insanity lay in the blood and in the vascular system, he concluded that mental derangement ought to have pathological status rather than being a sign of moral corruption or deliberate wickedness. His main contribution to the history of early American psychiatry was his taxonomic effort aimed at distinguishing different species of mania that required different remedies, including methods such as purges and bloodletting, used to rid the body of any damaging 'humour.' The anatomy of the brain and external factors - such as the climate, food, music, certain readings, strong stimuli in general, etc. - could provoke an accumulation of excitability and yield to quiescent wrong impressions, finally

determining 'Micronomia,' i.e. 'the partial or weakened action of the moral faculty.' This last, according to Rush, was a native principle, 'a capacity in the human mind of distinguishing and choosing good and evil, or, in other words, virtue and vice,' which he believed to consist 'in *action*, and not in opinion,' where 'this action has its seat in the will, and not in the conscience.'<sup>50</sup> Finally, he demonstrated how this mental faculty could be a legacy of previous generations, thus rooted in one's family tree. Most of his comments on the relation between madness and morality, however, are a clear consequence of his personal study of Philip Pinel's 'moral treatment,' generally considered as the first step towards humanizing psychiatry.

Governor of Bicêtre, an asylum in Paris for male patients, and superintendent of the female lunatic asylum La Salpêtrière (a former gunpowder factory!) since 1795, Pinel must have had an impact on Poe's interest in mental illness. A long series of behavioural and symptomatological analogies can be detected, in fact, between Monsieur Maillard's inmates and Philip Pinel's patients.

Their first common feature concentrates on the old conception that an inmate should not 'make a spectacle of himself' since 'to a sensitive mind there is always more or less of the shocking in such exhibitions.'<sup>51</sup> Consequently, it is necessary to act in a cautious way in front of an inmate and limit the number of visitors to the patients who otherwise would be 'aroused to a dangerous frenzy by injudicious persons who called to inspect the house.'<sup>52</sup> The internal management of the Maison de Santé proposes the same dispositions of the asylum at Bicêtre, since in his *Traité medico-philosophique sur l'alienation mentale ou la manie* Pinel states that,

The necessity of restricting ... the visit of strangers and other curious people into lunatic hospitals is very much felt in France. ... To see the unfortunate beings there confined, already too much the objects of pity, made the sport and the spectacle of the unfeeling and the mischievous, calls no less for redress than sympathy.<sup>53</sup>

Another similarity between Pinel's study and Poe's tale is the idea that their patients benefit from diversions or from limited responsibilities within the asylum. Pinel writes:

Laborious employment ... is not a little calculated to divert the thoughts of lunatics from their usual morbid channel. ... Where this method is adopted, little difficulty is experienced in the maintenance of order, and in the conduct and distribution of lunatics ...<sup>54</sup>

Whereas Poe's character affirms:

We put much faith in amusements of a simple kind, such as music, dancing, gymnastic exercises generally, cards, certain classes of

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books, and so forth. We affected to treat each individual as if for some ordinary physical disorder; and the word 'lunacy' was never employed.<sup>55</sup>

Although there is no evidence that Poe actually read psychiatric theories at first hand, we know however that he was friend to Dr. Pliny Earle, who was resident physician of the Friends Asylum of the Insane at Frankford, near Philadelphia, from 1840 to 1842. A letter written by Poe to Dr. Earle on October 10th, 1840 shows that the nature of their relationship was more literary than medical, but we may suppose that the physician was the writer's source of information for this tale.<sup>56</sup> In April 1841, *The American Journal of the Medical Science* quoted a reprinting of Dr. Earle's *Visits to Thirteen Asylums for the Insane in Europe* (1839), a report that accounts of the institutions he visited abroad. The second part of the volume includes an essay on 'the causes, duration, termination, and moral treatment of insanity,' together with interesting statistical statements. Dr. Earle was crucial in the diffusion of Pinel's theories in America, but he also provided a major contribution in challenging the 'curability' rates of many American asylums of his time. He was suspicious of the figures that were regularly published in the *American Journal of Insanity*, so much that in 1877 he published a study to object the strong belief that 'from 75 to 90 per cent of all persons becoming insane can be cured and restored from the class of mere consumers to the class of *producers*.'<sup>57</sup> In a way Earle, as much as Poe, was commenting on the 'credulity' of his generation.

## 8. Institutionalising America

The anonymous narrator of Poe's tale mentions that the asylum is a private structure and that its regulations are 'more rigid than the public hospital laws.'<sup>58</sup> Poe's insistence on the *private* status and management of the lunatic asylum is not to be disregarded, since it is a good indication of how social, economic, and ethnic disparities affected both the consideration and the treatment of the insane in the progressive America of the nineteenth century. The new reformist impetus that seized the country also imposed a certain degree of responsibility on wide social groups - minorities, orphans, criminals, paupers, prostitutes, slaves, the mentally ill - and while they soon became a pressing preoccupation of philanthropic religious associations, it was undeniable that they were also deemed as unproductive fringes of the society. Moreover, if in the past they elicited a pitying response, since any constitutional deficiency was seen in the light of an inscrutable divine plan, modern America tended to make them responsible for their own ill-condition, adding up to 'the shame of the States.'<sup>59</sup> As for psychological disturbances, in particular, the equation of mental illness with evil, and democracy with pietistic philanthropic aims, underscored the urgency to conceal moral monstrosity from the sight of the so-called 'normalcy.'

Thomas S. Szasz explains that the invention of the institutionalization of the insane was, in fact, the response to the need of the dominant classes of English society. 'Psychiatry,' he adds, 'began with the relatives of unwanted, troublesome persons seeking relief from the embarrassment and suffering their kin caused them.'<sup>60</sup> What is striking in the systematic operation of separating 'the deviant' from the rest of society, was the lack of a precise method of categorization; the scarce knowledge of psychopathology, inadequacies in the formalization and enforcement of a penal code, the total deficiency of proper structures to host them, they all contributed to reinforce old stereotypes on deviancy. A radical policy was in need; coerced institutionalization was the answer.

This tendency in America was triggered by intense exchanges with Great Britain. In 1834, the new Poor Law Act decreed that external relief for the poor was to be stopped, and that conditions in workhouses were to be made harsh in order to discourage indolence. America was particularly affected by these new dispositions, as seen in Poe's tale. The writer's decision to settle the story in a private madhouse reflects all his contempt against the falseness of philanthropic projects, which eventually resulted to be capitalistic enterprises: lunatic asylums were a lucrative activity since inmates could be charged for bed and board as well as for medical treatment.

However, the supposed unproductiveness of mad people calls for reassessment and re-definition. The 'moral therapy' adopted in many institutions throughout the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries proved to be a convenient system of labour exploitation, which allowed public works to save a substantial amount of money, while publicly endorsing a fraudulent practice intended for the patients' benefit. Besides, more often than not the keepers of these institutions were religious people, thus sustaining the principle that the cure of the mind was to be paired to the cure of the soul.

It is not by chance that the first 'lunatick asylum' in America was founded by Quakers. Their religious beliefs, together with a strong sense of pragmatism, made them key figures in Philadelphia, the same city where Poe lived between 1838 and 1844, and where the Pennsylvania Hospital, the first American '*general hospital*,' was built 'for the Relief of the Sick Poor of this Province, and for the Reception and Cure of Lunatics.'<sup>61</sup> This programmatic statement acquired a certain prominence, since for the first time a new attitude toward the insane was reflected: neither a monster, nor a devilish creature, the deviant was gradually becoming a *patient*, thus acquiring the right to receive proper treatment, as expressed in the British 1845 Lunacy Act. Still, the ideal physical collocation of the '*lunatick*' remained the basement - 'a secret cell' in Poe's story, 'lest his disorder should infect the rest' - chains and straight-jackets were frequently in use to control the patient's 'sudden turn of fury,' although, as Poe's superintendent explains, 'with the raging maniac we have nothing to do. He is usually removed to the public hospital.'<sup>62</sup>

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Interestingly, there are several analogies between the story written by Poe and the history of the Pennsylvania Hospital. Thomas Morton, for instance, states that the first two mental patients to be admitted were women; that the physicians exercised despotic powers over at least some of the 'patients' (in particular, over black people, women, debtors, and mental patients); and that, from the beginning, the institution functioned as an extra-legal prison.<sup>63</sup> Edgar Allan Poe himself used some of this information to reassure his readers. When in 'The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether' the narrator describes the guests to the banquet, he highlights the numerical supremacy of women ('I noticed that at least two-thirds of these guests were ladies' - and later on: 'I have always understood that the majority of lunatics were of the gentler sex.'<sup>64</sup>). Poe needed to encourage his readers to purchase his literature, and this could take place only if certain conditions were guaranteed: this is a story of French people, not of Americans; the *Maison de Santé* is in the forest of insanity, not in the city of sound production; the germ of madness is more frequently genetically inscribed in women, rather than in men.

Obviously, both Poe's short story and the first American lunatic asylums refer to a specific European model, a sort of archetypal example to emulate. By virtue of a dense flux of new ideas, which were rapidly absorbed by the New Continent, Americans started to appreciate the experiments of Samuel Tuke in Great Britain and Philippe Pinel in France. On the eve of the industrial revolution, America attempted to reformulate the concept of madness, to decipher and decode its language, finally to categorize its various types, in a strenuous effort of taxonomy.

In Europe, the liberation of madness coincided with the liberation of patients from chains, so that the lunatic asylum eventually acquired administrative autonomy. At the same time, though, it also became the site of the crystallization of a social microcosm, where established social relations were of 'moral' nature. The madhouse included and mixed two relevant myths of the eighteenth century: on the one hand society, on the other the patriarchal family. If it sprang from a sort of contractual coalition, it also re-proposed the founding of collective life, sometimes heavily imbued with religious undertones. As in a patriarchal family, affective and normative implications started to mark it with a long series of antonymic relations: paternal authority and filial duty, parental responsibility and the offspring's sense of gratitude were at the base of a re-enactment of old - even biblical - dynamics. The solution of the lunatic asylum was the only response to the juridical responsibilities of an ineffective government, and when the number of the insane started to rise beyond any possible estimate, the government started to invest in curative treatments, so that the patients could reacquire their skills, be recovered, and reintroduced into the circuits of society.<sup>65</sup> Eventually, while centring upon issues of power and control, Poe's 'The System' also foregrounds the concept of human perfectibility, the role of society's remedial power, and the 'productive' aspect of institutionalization.



## 9. Conclusion

'The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether' addresses many of the theories on madness which were later associated with the French philosopher Michel Foucault, while mocking the paradoxical liberation of the insane and their relations with physicians. Pinel freed his patients from their chains, but with that de/liberation he also condemned them to a much harsher incarceration: he allowed them to express their desires, only to deny them in the name of order and authority, since it was still the doctor who finally played the role of the father, the judge, the executioner. Like Pinel's asylum, Poe's madhouse ends up being a social microcosm, where order reproduces the same 'moral' laws - although ironically amplified - of the external society of 'normal' people. Poe, however, builds his structure only to dismantle it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J. W. Ostrom (ed) *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 1, Harvard UP, Cambridge, 1948, pp. 253-54. The short story appeared in *The Graham's Magazine*.

<sup>2</sup> See 'The Spectacles' (1844), 'The Sphinx' (1846), 'Mellonta Tauta' (1849). Poe's satirical intent is clearly demonstrated in many of his letters. For example, on February 11, 1836, Poe writes to John P. Kennedy: 'You are nearly, but not altogether right in relation to the satire of some of my Tales. Most of them were *intended* for half banter, half satire - altogether I might not have fully acknowledged this to be their aim even to myself.' Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Last Update: November 26, 2009, viewed on 2 January 2011, <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p3602110.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup> Many guesses and speculations were advanced: from John Pendleton Kennedy to Nathaniel Parker Willis and Charles Dickens. See S Mooney, 'The Comic in Poe's Fiction'. *American Literature*, vol. 33, 1962, p. 433.

<sup>4</sup> R. W. Griswold, 'The Ludwig Article', in *Critics on Poe*, D. Kesterson (ed), University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, FL, 1973, pp. 18-23.

<sup>5</sup> H Maudsley, 'Edgar Allan Poe'. *American Journal of Insanity*, vol. 17, October 1860, p. 188.

<sup>6</sup> Maudsley claims that 'the excitable temperament and perverse disposition inherited from the parents' brought the poet to take 'the wrong turning, and never afterwards recovered his way; he had been destined by constitution to it.' *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 177.

<sup>7</sup> J. W. Krutch, *E.A. Poe: A Study in Genius*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1926. Of the same author: 'The Strange Case of Poe'. *The American Mercury*, vol. 6, November 1925, pp. 349-356.

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<sup>8</sup> G. R. Thompson, *Poe's Fiction, Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> G. J. Kennedy, 'A Mania for Composition': Poe's *Annus Mirabilis* and the Violence of Nation-building'. *American Literary History*, vol. 17 (1), 2005, pp. 1-35.

<sup>10</sup> Ostrom (ed), op. cit., p. 256. Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance the letter that Poe wrote to engineer James Herron: 'The state of my mind has ... forced me to abandon for the present, all mental exertion. The renewed and hopeless illness of my wife, ill health on my own part, and pecuniary embarrassments, have nearly driven me to distraction.' Ibid., p. 198. Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, op. cit., viewed on 2 January 2011, <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4801040.htm>>.

<sup>14</sup> Poe himself solved it in his *Marginalia* by stating that 'Great wit to madness nearly is allied ... What the world calls 'genius' is the state of mental disease arising from the undue predominance of some one of the faculties. The works of such genius are never sound in themselves and, in especial, always betray the general mental insanity', in *Poe. Essays and Reviews*, G. R. Thompson (ed), The Library of America, New York, 1984, p. 1301.

<sup>15</sup> B. Reiss, *Theatres of Madness: Insane Asylums and Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Elmer, Jonathan, *Reading at the Social Limit. Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe*, Stanford UP, Stanford, CA, 1995; J Dyan, 'Poe, Persons, and Property'. *American Literary History*, vol. 11, n. 3, Autumn 1999, pp. 405-25 later in *Romancing the Shadow. Poe and Race*, J. G. Kennedy and L. Weissberg (eds), Oxford UP, Oxford, 2001, pp. 106-26; M. S. Lee, 'Absolute Poe: His System of Transcendental Racism'. *American Literature*, vol. 75, n. 4, December 2003, pp. 751-781.

<sup>17</sup> P. Quinn (ed), *Poe. Poetry and Tales*, The Library of America, New York, 1984, p. 699.

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy, 'A Mania for Composition', op. cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Reiss, op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>21</sup> M. Foucault, *Folie et Dérison. Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique*, Plon, Paris, 1961.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, 'A Mania for Composition', p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, R & J Dodsley, London, 1757.

<sup>24</sup> 'If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul, - that I have deduced this terror only from its

legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results...' Preface to Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, Philadelphia 1840, in Quinn, op.cit., p. 129.

<sup>25</sup> Ostrom, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *Essays and Reviews*, op. cit., p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> Quinn, op. cit., p. 699.

<sup>28</sup> Ostrom, op. cit., p. 256.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Essays and Reviews*, op. cit., p. 714.

<sup>30</sup> E. A. Poe, *Fifty Suggestions*, n. 28, in Thompson, *Essays and Reviews*, op. cit., p. 1303.

<sup>31</sup> Quinn, op. cit., p. 702.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 699.

<sup>33</sup> H. Bergson, *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*, Librairie Félix Alcan, Paris, 1938. In *Fifty Suggestions* Poe comments: "Ignorance is bliss" - but, that the bliss be real, the ignorance must be so profound as not to suspect itself ignorant.' G. R. Thompson (ed), *Essays and Reviews*, op. cit., p. 1305.

<sup>34</sup> Quinn, op. cit., p. 714. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 713.

<sup>37</sup> According to Bergson: 'Ce que la vie et la société exigent de chacun de nous, c'est une attention constamment en éveil ...', op. cit., pp. 18-19.

<sup>38</sup> Quinn, op.cit., p. 703.

<sup>39</sup> I. Bojarska, 'Madness: An Escape or a Dead End?', in this volume.

<sup>40</sup> Ostrom, op.cit., p. 256.

<sup>41</sup> P Bairati, 'Poe e la Società Americana: lo Straniero, le Province e l'Impero', in *Dal Gotico alla Fantascienza. Saggi di letteratura comparata*, R. Bianchi (ed), Mursia, Milano, 1978, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> They were, apparently, people of rank - certainly of high breeding - although their habiliments, I thought, were extravagantly rich, partaking somewhat too much of the ostentatious finery of the *vielle cour*. ... The profusion was absolutely barbaric. ... There seemed very little taste, however, in the arrangements .... Quinn (ed), op.cit., pp. 703-705.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 716.

<sup>44</sup> '... as a national air 'Yankee Doodle' does not direct itself to our sense of majesty, solemnity, dignity. It frankly appeals to our sense of humor. Critics, pedantic or flippant, have overlooked the fact that every nation has its humorous, even burlesque, patriotic airs, and that these are just as natural and useful as solemn airs - indeed, more so, occasionally. As a specimen of burlesque, even 'slangy,' musical humor, 'Yankee Doodle' may safely hold its own against any other patriotic air.' O G. T. Sonneck, *Report on 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' 'Hail Columbia,' 'America,'*

'Yankee Doodle.' Library of Congress, Washington Government Printing Office, 1909, p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>46</sup> The British alienist Henry Maudsley's wrote a case study on Poe, which was reprinted in 1860 in the *American Journal of Insanity*. His general portrait of the insane also bears similarities with Griswold's obituary: 'An irregular and unsymmetrical conformation of the head, a want of regularity and harmony of the features ... There are tics, grimaces, or other spasmodic movements of muscles of face, eyelids, or lips afterwards. Stammering and defects of pronunciation are also sometimes signs of the neurosis.' Henry Maudsley, 'Body and Mind' (1873), in *Madness and Morals*, V. Skultans, London-Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1975, pp. 94-95.

<sup>47</sup> Sonneck, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>48</sup> Reiss, op. cit., pp. 146 ff.

<sup>49</sup> N. Filippi, 'Madness and Punishment During Apartheid: Insane, Political and Common-Law Prisoners in the Western Cape' in this volume.

<sup>50</sup> B. Rush, 'On Different Species of Mania' in *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*, D. D. Runes (ed), Philosophical Library, New York, 1947, p. 182.

<sup>51</sup> Quinn (ed), op. cit., p. 703.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 701.

<sup>53</sup> P. Pinel, *A treatise on insanity: in which are contained the principles of a new and more practical nosology of maniacal disorders*. Trans. D. D. Davis, W. Todd, Sheffield, 1806, p. 213. See D Fargione, *Giardini e labirinti: l'America di E.A. Poe*, Celid, Torino, 2005, p. 52.

<sup>54</sup> ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Quinn (ed), op.cit., p. 702.

<sup>56</sup> See W Whipple, 'Poe's Two-Edged Satirical Tale'. *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 9, 1954, pp. 121-133.

<sup>57</sup> P. Earle, *The Curability of Insanity: A Series of Studies*, p. 64, viewed on 28 August 2010, emphasis added,

<[http://books.google.it/books?id=OKnZPIPmuD0C&printsec=frontcover&dq=earle+the+curability&hl=it&ei=Jp97Tie9L4KWOMSJxNQG&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.it/books?id=OKnZPIPmuD0C&printsec=frontcover&dq=earle+the+curability&hl=it&ei=Jp97Tie9L4KWOMSJxNQG&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false)>.

<sup>58</sup> Quinn (ed), op.cit., p. 699.

<sup>59</sup> This is also the title of A Deutsch's pivotal study *The Shame of the States*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1948.

<sup>60</sup> T. S. Szasz, *The Medicalization of Everyday Life: Selected Essays*, Syracuse UP, Syracuse, NY, 2007, p. 55.

<sup>61</sup> From the petition that the *Society of Friends* wrote in 1751 to solicit the approval of their project, i.e. the building of 'an Infirmary, or Hospital, in the manner of several lately established in Great Britain.' Deutsch, op.cit., p. 59.

<sup>62</sup> Quinn (ed), op.cit., p. 702.

<sup>63</sup> *The History of the Pennsylvania Hospital, 1751-1895*, quoted in T. Szasz, *The Age of Madness, The History of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1973, pp. 12-13.

<sup>64</sup> Quinn (ed), op. cit., pp. 703, 710.

<sup>65</sup> In 1843 John Barlow published in London an essay on mental illness in America, where he commented: 'The cases of insanity, we are told, have nearly tripled within the last twenty years! - a fearful increase, even after allowing to the utmost for a larger population! - of these cases it is calculated that less than three hundred in one thousand are the result of disease, or of unavoidable circumstances, thus leaving above seven hundred resulting from bodily excess or mental misgovernment.' J Barlow, *Increase in Insanity*, in V. Skultans, op.cit., p.168.

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**Daniela Fargione** is Assistant Professor at the University of Torino, Italy, where she teaches Anglo-American Literatures and Theory and Practice of Literary Translation. She also works as a translator.